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No Door Stays Closed to God

*Expelled from China by the Communists,
the author surveys world missions,
thinks, "It is time we listened to
God, not to our own defeated hearts"*

By Samuel H. Moffett

BACK in China, the Communists used to laugh at us. "You Christians are old-fashioned," they said. "When are you going to wake up to the new day?" They did not know, and some Christians don't know that the Christian mission does have a new day. It is not the day of the Communist revolution, of course. It does not have to be. We have a revolution of our own.

Others have already described that revolution. On the one side, we have been stabbed awake to some of the hard realities of the world in which we live by the scourge of God—the Communists descending like the Assyrians of old in judgment on complacent Christendom. That is the painful side of the revolution. But there is another side. There is a glory that breaks through the darkness. It is the glory of the rise of the younger churches. Now, for the first time in history, we Protestants have a world-wide Church, a fellowship beyond our borders, twenty-eight-million strong in lands where only 160 years ago there was scarcely a single Protestant church. That is the most important fact in the history of the Church in our times, and it gives us leave to think of the new day, not in terms of judgment, but as a day of beckoning challenge

and a day of opening doors for our faith.

But for anyone who really knows world conditions, it must seem the height of presumption to speak of the world mission of the Church and say, "The doors are wide open." Everyone knows that these are the days of the *closing* of doors. Travelers return from Africa and tell us of the Mau Mau and the paralyzing spread of racial tensions. "The white man will be out of Africa," they say, "thrown out, in three, four, or five years." Not long ago, I heard a missionary from India say, "We have perhaps ten more years in India." Ten more years to work, and then the revolution.

Most people agree that in Japan the days of widest opportunities are past. People, once so eager, after the disillusionment of defeat, to drink in the good news of the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ; people who a few years ago were storming the platforms at great evangelistic meetings to buy portions of the Scriptures—these people seem no longer quite so eager for the gospel, and national pride is entering in once more, disguised as an alternative to the Christian faith. National pride makes a very attractive substitute to faith, even in America.

In Latin America, I regret to say, it is Roman Catholic persecution that is

closing doors. After centuries of decay, the Roman Church is belatedly stirring itself to meet the threat of the full gospel and is trying in every conceivable way to hinder the progress of the small but growing Evangelical Churches. Some time ago, I received this letter from a friend in Colombia:

"Dear Friends:

"Home again and at worship this Sunday morning in the Ibague Presbyterian Church. . . . We are reading responsively from John: 'My peace I give unto you.' Peace! There is not much of it in Colombia. . . . Over on the women's side of the congregation, I see Gonzalo Garcia sitting beside a senorita. Gonzalo is only twenty-two, but he has already suffered for his faith. In Mariquita, Tolima, last June, he and three others were seized by the national police while in a young people's meeting in their church. In the sanctuary they were beaten with gun butts until they were covered with blood. Then they were marched off to the police barracks for four hours of torture. They were beaten, whipped, and clubbed. Time after time, they were dumped in a tank of dirty water. They were rolled naked through the hot ashes of burning rice chaff. They had to burn their own Bibles. They were cursed for corrupting the people with Protestant

doctrines. They were forced to drink from a latrine and to eat filth. Some of the things they endured cannot be mentioned. Gonzalo needs only to return to the Roman Catholic Church to save himself from any further difficulties. . . . Where are we? In the Dark Ages?"

It is a day of closing doors, racial tensions, rising nationalisms, political Roman Catholicism, Communism—all these power forces are closing the doors on the free proclamation of the gospel. And there is finally, of course, the echoing horror in the molecule whose tiny powers, unleashed and large, can slam the door in grim conclusion on this whole human race.

To me, naturally, China is a symbol of this whole world tragedy. When I went to China in 1947, the doors were wide open. With all the optimism of a new missionary, I was convinced that we needed only to proclaim the liberating truth of the love of God in Jesus Christ, and all China might be saved. That was not altogether an empty optimism back there in 1947. But in 1948, the Communist tide engulfed us; and in two short years, we were thrown out of the country we loved. We saw the door slammed shut behind us.

Some time ago, it was reported that the China secretaries of ten or twelve of the largest foreign-mission boards met in New York to review the China situation. During a recess, someone asked, "How long do you really think it will be before Christian missionaries can return to China?" The others shrugged their shoulders and said, "Who knows?" But the man persisted and finally they took a straw vote.

This was the result: One elderly saint with the optimism of grace voted three years; there was one vote for five years; but all the rest without exception voted ten, twenty, thirty years, or more. Now these were men with greater Christian responsibilities, closer contact with field conditions, and wider grasp of current events in the Far East, perhaps, than any others in America. Their considered opinion was the black and pessimistic prediction that China would be sealed against the gospel for the rest of our generation.

If that is so, it is the greatest setback and the most stunning calamity in the 160-year history of the modern missionary movement. It is only one of the closing doors, but it can mean that the

shadow of spiritual death is falling on one fifth of the population of the globe. The door has closed on China. Will it close on the rest of the world as well?

Only in the perspective of history, can we really know how much tragedy is bound up with the closing of those doors and at what great cost the doors were opened. Take China as an example. Robert Morrison asked his mission board, "Send me to the most difficult field you have." They sent him to China, and there he labored, straining with inflexible determination, unbroken courage, his shoulder to the fast-closed door, for seven long years—seven years without a convert, seven years with nothing to show for his sacrifice and labor. They laughed at him. "And so, Mr. Morrison, you really expect that you will make an impression on the idolatry of the great Chinese Empire." "No, sir," said Morrison, "but God will." Morrison lived to see God open the door to China.

AFTER the pioneers, came those who kept the door open through war and pestilence, flood and famine, even through the bloody horrors of the Boxer Rebellion, when 200 missionaries and 20,000 Chinese Christians lost their lives. Up in Paotingfu, ninety miles from Peking, the Boxers broke into the Presbyterian mission compound. The missionary group included Paul and Frances Simcox, twelve- and nine-year-old children of one of the missionary couples. The mob set fire to the missionary houses. As the fire and smoke rose unbearably through the home, the two children broke from their parents' arms, out through the door into the cool, fresh air beyond, into the hands of the angry mob. The mission doctor raced upstairs to a window, thinking he might be able to protect the children with a gun. Then, seeing that it was no use, he pleaded with the crowd to spare their lives. "We will gladly die here," he cried, "but let the children go." And the mob laughed and spit at him, cut off the children's heads with their swords, and stuffed their bodies down a well, while the good doctor died in the flames where he stood.

But they did not die in vain. The courage and heroism of the martyrs brought about such a revulsion of feeling among the Chinese and such an inspiration to volunteer for overseas service among young people at home that one missionary wrote, "My own judgment is that the cause of missions has

been advanced twenty-five years by the massacres of the year 1900." They kept the doors open, even in death. And through those doors entered the liberating gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. At the height of the 1920's there were 8,000 Protestant missionaries in China alone. There were over 530 of our own Presbyterian missionaries in that land.

But not now. The martyrs died to keep the door open. And we are letting it close. Once there were 8,000 Protestant missionaries in China; today there are perhaps eight. Three of those eight are our own Presbyterian missionaries. For three years they have been held in Communist jails. We should remember their names before God every day: Dr. and Mrs. Homer Bradshaw and Miss Sara Perkins.

The door to China has slammed shut. I do not need to be reminded of that; I was almost caught in the shutting of it. And Christians like us sit here comfortably and shake our heads and say, "Yes, the door is closing in China. Too bad. There is nothing we can do about it."

What nonsense. What faint-hearted, easily discouraged, disbelieving Christians we are. I include myself in the indictment, for I have been as deadly discouraged as any about the situation in China. But in those days of discouragement, it was the strong and simple faith of my Chinese Christian colleagues, triumphant and courageous in the face of far more imminent and threatening perils than any I was called upon to endure, which lifted up my heart and restored my confidence and gave me new strength.

I remember a commencement service behind the curtain. It was a considerable period after the coming of the Communists. Already the first ominous signs of a harsher policy of Communist repression and control were beginning to appear. The hard skeleton of the police state was beginning to show beneath the rosy promises and enthusiasms of the liberation, and the first faint waves of fear swept through the land. Christians wondered what lay ahead. Some said that Communist agents were investigating mission-relief activities and were about to accuse the churches of misuse of supplies. Some said the government was about to seize all Christian institutions. Some said that religious freedom would soon be cruelly restricted. The assistant pastor of one of the churches in town was suddenly and mysteriously arrested. The door, which

to our surprise had remained open for some time after the coming of the Communists, seemed now at last about to close. It was in this tense and troubled time of rising doubts and fears that we assembled for the commencement address.

But for such a time of spreading fear as that, God brought to us as one of the commencement speakers his own man of the hour. I will not reveal his name. I do not even remember what he said. But I will never forget the thrill that ran through me as he stood up before that troubled, discouraged, tense group of Christian students and teachers, and announced his text: Revelation 3:8, "Behold I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

Even as he spoke, we could almost see the graduates, about to leave the shelter of the campus for the hard and hostile future of a Christian in Communist land—we could almost see them, graduates, teachers, all, straighten their shoulders and lift their heads. It was Red China; the Communists were upon us, but God was speaking to us, "Behold I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

It is high time we stopped this deadly talk about closed doors before us. It is time we listened to God, not to our own defeated hearts. Our God is able, and it is he who is speaking, the Almighty God, maker of Heaven and earth, Alpha and Omega, who by the word of his power rolled away the stone that closed the tomb at Calvary. No door stays closed to him, not even the door of death. This is the God who is saying to us, "Behold I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

"But it is closed," we think. "Try to go back to China, and you will find out." That is right, in a way. I cannot go back. That door does seem closed, closed by all the power and might of the Red Army.

Mission partners remain

But it is not closed. It is not closed to our brothers, the Chinese Christians. I do not know by what quirk of national pride we Americans begin to call the door to the gospel closed as soon as our American missionaries cannot get into any area. It is true that our missionaries have been forced out of China. But it has been rightly said that the really significant thing about the situation facing Christians in China is not the decline of the mission but the rise of the Chinese Church. The door is not closed to Chinese Christians, 800,000 of them, some weak, some dying, some de-

serting, and yet, by the grace of God, still bearing their witness as the remnant of the faithful. We cannot dictate to them their pattern of survival and witness behind the curtain. They are a Church, a Chinese Church, and I am as proud of being an ordained minister of the Church of Christ in China as of being an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. They are a Church no longer responsible to us but directly to God. They are not servants. They are partners in the mission, and the door is not closed to them, for they are in China, and they are Chinese.

How can we say that the doors are closing in Asia? Out of that continent is rising the Church of the future. A bare roll-call of some of the names is enough to dispel defeat: the Church of South India, the Batak Protestant Church of Sumatra, the Presbyterian Church of Korea, the Baptist Church in Burma, the United Church of Japan, the United Church of Christ of the Philippines, and the Methodist Church of South Asia. These, and many others like them, are the great new Churches of our time. They are our new partners in the new day.

When the pessimist speaks of closing doors in India, I can only remember that in sheer numbers India has the fastest-growing Church in the world. Four hundred new Christians there are brought every day of the year into the saving fellowship of the Church of Jesus Christ. And we with them in partnership in our ecumenical mission are now for the first time opening doors that have been closed to the Church for centuries. Today, for the first time in the history of the Christian Church, the door is opening to the Christian mission in Afghanistan and Nepal.

But there is more than a geographical frontier now opening before the world mission of the Church. There is the door of new methods of reaching the unreached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every year sees the Bible translated into new languages, unlocking yet more frontiers to the Word of God. A tribe of 100,000 people in our own Presbyterian field in Cameroun, Africa, must soon be given the gospel in its own tongue.

Radio goes everywhere

There is the magic door of radio. The other day in our offices here in New York, I happened to ride the elevator up to the thirteenth floor, and there on a bulletin board I saw this slogan: "Our programs [that is, our Christian radio and television broadcasts] reach more people in one week than heard the gospel in the first one-thousand years." The

Christian mission has rimmed the whole world with broadcasting stations, and we have not even begun to exhaust the possibilities of this wide-open door that is spread before us. Through new and open doors, we are called to enter into our mission for our day.

There are some doors that never have and never can be closed. There is the door of prayer. Jesus said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." How easily we forget this door that can never be closed to us. As we prepared to leave China, people began to come to us to say goodbye. Many were weeping, and we wept with them, for there seemed to be nothing that we could do for them in those last, dark days. But I remember best of all one Christian who came to us unfrightened and undistressed. She was just a girl, a high-school girl, seventeen years old. She was a leader of the little Christian fellowship on her high-school campus, and a tireless personal worker among the other girls. When she came to tell us goodbye, I asked her in a flat, discouraged tone if there was anything I could do for her now. I knew there was nothing. But she had more faith than I. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "Yes, there is. You can pray for me."

How dare we say that there is nothing we can do about the doors that are closing all over the world to the Christian mission? We have in our hands a power greater than that of all the Communist armies of Asia and Europe, a power that can split the Iron Curtain wide open as the veil of the temple was rent at Calvary, a power that can open any and every door known to man. It is the power of prayer. God says so. "Knock, and it shall be opened." If the doors have closed, is it because we have forgotten to pray? God says, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." No man can shut it to prayer.

But most important of all, the door is not closed to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. There was a door closed in Jerusalem one day, a door closed by fear. Jesus had been crucified, and his disciples huddled behind a closed door, in an upper room, defeated. But no door could shut out the Lord Jesus. "When the doors were shut . . . for fear, . . ." says John, "came Jesus and stood in the midst."

There is a footnote to the story of the commencement service about which I told you a few moments ago. Last summer, I heard that the man of God who lifted our hearts with God's promise, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it"—I heard that Christian had been imprisoned behind the doors of a Shanghai jail.

I am told now that the report was false, that he is not in jail. I don't know. I don't know what torments may be his today, inside or outside of jail. I do know that the Communists have ways

to turn the boldness of the boldest Christian into shivering fear. But I also know that not even fear can close the door to Jesus. "When the doors were shut . . . for fear, . . . came Jesus and stood in the midst." All the police in China cannot close the door to him, and I know he stands with that commencement speaker now, and with our three Presbyterian missionaries, who are in Chinese jails today, and with all his people, persecuted behind bars for righteousness' sake. And I know that if God so wills, He who smote the chains

from Peter's hands and opened the iron gates to bring him forth from a Roman prison, can open the doors of Chinese prisons and bring forth his people. Our God is able, and he says "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." It is not really the doors that are closed. It is our minds and our hearts and our eyes that are shut, not the doors. Our God is able, but are we? The doors are wide open and the question God asks is this: "What are you going to do now about the open door?"

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